

Restricted Flight

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Every year, interagency firefighting units place temporary flight restrictions on airspace over fires where aviation resources are needed to support ground-based units. Like fires, these airspace restrictions emerge with little warning. Besides creating distractions and hazards for ground and air units fighting the fire, aircraft that penetrate these areas put themselves and others at risk for midair collisions. Below is an excerpt from a safety communication report received on August 28, 2006, during last summer's especially active fire season.

"While working out of the Purdy Fire Helibase located at Dubois Airport (U25), helitack personnel observed three military Black Hawk helicopters in loose formation traveling from southeast to northwest along the southwest side of the runway approximately 800 to 900 feet above ground level. At this time, helibase radio operators were notified and in turn notified the helicopter coordinator and other airborne helicopters. HLCO attempted to contact the Black Hawks on air-to-air radios without success. At this point the Black Hawks had not yet entered the fire TFR area; however, they quickly passed the airport and then continued west-northwest, climbed slightly over terrain and eventually crossed the fire entering at approximately Division X and continued through the middle of the fire going northwest, exiting the TFR on the west-northwest side and then continued to Jackson, Wyo. HLCO was over the fire at this time along with one medium helicopter performing bucket work. The Black Hawks flew below the HLCO at approximately 500 to 800 feet AGL as they went through the fire airspace and TFR. There was a presidential TFR in place 25 miles to the west for Jackson, Wyo., at the time of the intrusion."

A review of wildland fire airspace intrusion incidents reported for fiscal 2006 showed 41 TFR violations, with 11 of those being military aircraft. In the first 8 months of 2006, there were 79,944 wildland fires that covered 7,820,449 acres. Compared to the 10-year average of about 58,000 fires per year, 2006 was particularly challenging for interagency firefighters.

TFR information is available to all aviators to help them avoid inadvertent violations of restricted airspace due to firefighting operations and other national airspace restrictions. It's important for pilots to be aware of issued flight restrictions because of the low-level, dense operations of aircraft in a fire zone. Military aviators can help wildland firefighters maintain a safe firefighting environment by doing two things:

- Before every flight, check notices to airmen and Web sites that carry the latest TFR information. One excellent source is the National Airspace Information Web site at <http://airspace.nifc.gov/mapping/nifc/index.cfm>.
- Look for signs of wildland fire such as smoke and remain well clear of the area, keeping a lookout for aircraft that might be en route to or from the fire.

For additional information on how wildland firefighters use airspace and aircraft in support of their missions, check out our airspace Web site at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/fire/aviation/airspace/web/index.html>. Help us keep the skies safe so all aviators and firefighters can go home at the end of their shift.

